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Decision comes after years of Religious Liberty proponents working with government officials

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August 08, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | ANN staff

Seventh-day Adventist Church President Ted N. C. Wilson released the following statement today expressing concern over the persecution of religious minorities in Iraq and Syria:

It is with great sadness and deep concern that we have learned of the tragic situation where tens of thousands of Christians and others have been subjected to persecution, coercion, killings, intimidation and lack of religious liberty in certain areas of Iraq and Syria.

I urgently call upon all Seventh-day Adventist Church members around the world to pray for the victims of this extremism in religious intolerance. We also need to pray for various religious minorities who are targeted because of their religious convictions and beliefs.

It is important that the international community act unitedly to stop the persecution of Christian believers and others who represent those who have lived in relative peace with their Muslim neighbors in the Middle East for hundreds of years. The Seventh-day Adventist Church will do its best to assist victims of this new tragedy, which reflects a total lack of religious liberty, and we will earnestly pray for a positive resolution to this appalling situation. May the Holy Spirit as the Comforter come especially close to those facing immediate persecution and death at this time.

—Ted N. C. Wilson, President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

Adventist Church recommends staff, members not travel to and from West Africa
An Adventist is one of more than 930 victims of Ebola outbreak

August 08, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | Ansel Oliver/ANN

The Seventh-day Adventist Church’s top health official urged Church employees and members to not travel to and from countries in West Africa affected by the Ebola epidemic, a recommendation that comes on the day the World Health Organization declared the outbreak an international health emergency.

Health Ministries Director Dr. Peter Landless also said officials at the Church’s world headquarters are working with two Adventist hospitals in West Africa to protect staff and patients from the virus.

The outbreak across three West African countries has killed more than 930 people during the past six months, including an Adventist Church member. Church member Joenpu Loweal, a 27-year-old nurse, died after contracting the Ebola virus while working in her job at Phebe hospital in Liberia’s Bong county, said James Golay, president of the denomination’s West Africa Union Mission.

In an email to presidents of each of the denomination’s 13 world divisions and two attached fields, Landless recommended:

• Avoidance of travel from the affected countries—Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea—to conferences elsewhere until there is clear evidence that the epidemic is abating and under control.

• In the most severely affected areas, avoidance of attendance at public gatherings.

• When meeting and greeting, please avoid hugging and other cherished public displays of affection during this difficult time.

“These recommendations are stringent, but necessary, and reminiscent of those suggested during the SARS outbreak a few years ago,” Landless said.

The WHO today declared the Ebola outbreak an international health emergency and urged several heads of state to declare a state of emergency. According to media reports, WHO Director General Margaret Chan said at a news conference today that the affected countries are unable to manage the outbreak on their own.

The operations of two Adventist hospitals in West Africa are being closely monitored by officials at the world headquarters and by California-based Adventist Health International, which oversees the two facilities. In an interview, Landless said there is close collaboration between the Adventist Church’s headquarters, AHI and the denomination’s Loma Linda University in dealing with crisis.

Landless said Cooper Seventh-day Adventist Hospital in Liberia has been designated as a non-Ebola hospital. The Liberian government has mandated that patients suspected to be infected with
the Ebola virus should be sent to government hospitals specifically designated to treat the disease, he said.

“We’re working to ensure as much as possible the safety of patients and personnel, and we’re doing our best to remain a support to the overburdened health system during this very difficult time for the affected territories,” Landless said.

Church leaders said they are also monitoring operations at Waterloo Seventh-day Adventist Hospital in Sierra Leone.

“Our prayers, thoughts, and support are with all who are affected and infected,” said Orville Parchment, assistant to the Adventist Church president.

Ebola is spread through contact with bodily fluids and tissues of an infected person. Those most at risk are healthcare staff and family members caring for someone affected with the virus, according to the WHO. Ebola kills up to 90 percent of people who contract the virus.

The current Ebola outbreak is the largest in the virus’ 40-year history, health officials said.

Leaders at the Adventist Church headquarters said they have monitored the situation for several months based on information from the WHO and the Centers for Disease Control.

In recent weeks, Adventist leaders in West Africa have postponed scheduled conferences, including a youth rally and a Women’s Ministries meeting.

—additional reporting by Gilbert Wari

In Portugal, top court grants two Adventists Saturdays off from work

Decision comes after years of Religious Liberty proponents working with government officials

August 07, 2014 | Silver Spring, Maryland, United States | Ansel Oliver/ANN

Seventh-day Adventists in Portugal welcomed a ruling from the nation’s highest court last month that offers a step toward allowing greater workplace freedom to take a particular day off for religious observance.

A decision handed down by the Constitutional Court on July 17 permitted two Adventists employed in a shift schedule the right to take off Saturdays for religious observance. Portuguese law only permits employees the right to choose their days off when working in a flexible schedule, an arrangement that few people in the Western European country have, Adventist Church leaders said.
Seventh-day Adventists observe the biblical Sabbath as sundown Friday evening to sundown Saturday evening.

Church leaders said the court's decision doesn’t set judicial precedent for similar cases—as might happen in some other countries. But the ruling will now make it easier for Adventists to lobby lawmakers to consider the plight of Adventists, Jews, Muslims and others who keep a holy day other than Sunday, which is widely given by employers as a day off.

“This was a huge achievement because this was the first time the law was overruled by the court,” said Paulo Sérgio Macedo, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Adventist world church’s Portuguese Union of Churches.

Macedo said Adventist leaders have worked on trying to change the law since 2010. He emphasized that the Adventist Church in Portugal has good working relationships with government authorities and the Religious Liberty Commission.

Last month’s decision from the Constitutional Court stemmed from two cases.

An Adventist Church member working as a public prosecutor was denied her requests to have Saturday’s off, and she lost an appeal at the Court of Administration and a subsequent appeal at the Administrative Supreme Court.

Another Adventist Church member employed by a corporation was fired after leaving work at sundown Friday evening. She also lost earlier appeals in lower courts.

The Constitutional Court’s decision expanded the interpretation of Article 14 of the 2001 Religious Liberty Law, which stated that only people working in a flexible schedule could have Saturday as a day of rest.

“We weren’t protesting religious liberty law, which is actually one of the most progressive religious liberty laws in Europe,” Macedo said. “We were only trying to support members who had a problem with that particular part of the law. Almost no one works in a flexible schedule, and this interpretation opens new opportunities for our members.”

In 2011, officials from the Adventist Church’s Portuguese Union presented to the Portuguese Ombudsman the challenges faced by Saturday-keeping employees. In the ensuing years, the Portuguese Union received support from the denomination’s Inter-European Division and the General Conference world headquarters.

Dwayne Leslie, legislative affairs director at the General Conference, who offered consulting to the Portuguese Union during the process, said he was pleased with the court’s decision.

“We’re hoping this gives further support to people of faith in choosing how to practice their freedom of conscience,” Leslie said. “You shouldn’t have to choose between your faith and profession.”

Leslie said accommodations for Sabbath observance is one of the most common issues that Adventists face.

Macedo said last month’s court decision will likely get the attention of lawmakers beyond Portugal.
“I think this was the first time in Europe that we had [the Saturday Sabbath] recognized constitutionally this high,” he said. “This is a big step, but it’s only a step.”

Guatemalan president encourages Adventist youth congress delegates to be agents of change

Community service projects, health outreach are highlights

August 06, 2014 | Guatemala City, Guatemala | Libna Stevens/IAD/ANN

Nearly 6,000 Adventist youth delegates listened eagerly to President of Guatemala Otto Perez Molina during Inter-America’s Youth Congress opening program on July 31 at Ciudad San Cristobal Mega Auditorium in Guatemala City, Guatemala.

“I am truly happy that you are here and are embracing Guatemala,” said Otto Perez Molina, president of Guatemala, as he welcomed the delegates. Molina thanked the youth delegation and church leaders for participating in dozens of projects to benefit needy communities throughout the country during the past 10 days.

The president also praised the healthy lifestyle adhered to by church members and shared that he too has made better health choices recently, more so as the government is about to adopt and launch the Adventist Church’s “I Want to Live Healthy” initiative—with its eight natural remedies to help improve the lives of people.

“It is a pleasure and honor to receive this activity that you will take part of living healthy,” Molina said.

The president went on to challenge young people to be of service to those in need.

“You are the agents of change to make a difference in your countries,” he said. “We need your spirit, we need your strength and your commitment.”

Otto Perez Leal, the mayor of Mixco and son of the president, thanked the Church for choosing his municipal district to hold such a historic youth event.

Mayor Perez Leal challenged young people to “keep fighting for your dreams, your ideals, and continue contributing to society, and work together with local governments to help people in need for a positive change in their lives.

“In Mixco you have support and friendship,” the mayor added before granting special recognition to Inter-American Division President Israel Leito as a distinguished guest of the city.
Leito prayed for the government leaders and their spouses as the cultural segment of the evening concluded.

"I want to tell you that we are starting a revolution here," Leito said as he addressed the delegation. "We want to revolutionize our homes with a powerful generation of children, we want to revolutionize our universities with a powerful generation of students and we want to revolutionize our churches with a super powerful generation of young people serving the Lord in their congregations and communities."

The energy-packed opening ceremony saw a colorful display of the dozens of cultures, languages and musical performances, which set the tone for the next four days of the congress.

Organizers expect the theme of the congress to have a lasting impact across Inter-America, said Benjamin Carballo, Youth Ministries director for the Church’s Inter-American Division.

“You are a powerful generation and we want you to experience embracing Guatemala, embracing one another and reaching out to embrace Jesus in your daily walk this week," Carballo said. “Your goal as youth leaders is to lead the youth to a life of service and accept the call of Christ."

Of the 150 delegates that were supposed to travel from West Venezuela, only six were able to travel due to flight restrictions, said Emilio Perche, Youth Ministries director for West Venezuela, who arrived just in time for the opening of the event.

“This is a huge event young people have been waiting for so we are thankful to finally make it here,” Perche said.

Claudy Retel from the Saint Martin Church in Guadeloupe traveled with 72 young people and said she was overjoyed to be part of the opening. "I am delighted with what I have seen about the event," he said. "I have understood that young people are a powerful force in the church and Jesus is pleased with this."

Violeta Dávila from the Central Guatemala Church could sum it up briefly: “This event could not have been better. It’s an explosion of joy and bliss for Guatemala.”

Young people built eight homes in extreme poor communities, repaired five sporting courts, remodeled four classrooms, cleaned up streets and have provided food to poor communities and nursing homes throughout Guatemala.

—Lizbeth Elejalde contributed to this story
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